

Can Goliath Defeat David?

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A common assumption in military circles is that the U.S. faces a future of increasing involvement in insurgency warfare. Insurgents frequently fight asymmetrically against counter-insurgent forces—the strategy of David against Goliath. If the United States must in fact fight such wars, we (the authors) certainly want it to be able to fight smartly and effectively. At the same time—when we recall who won the battle between David and Goliath—we think it would be a good idea to do everything possible to stay out of such fights.

This David vs. Goliath metaphor for asymmetric war was explored in a [Rand study](#) on deception and urban operations by Gerwehr and Glenn. They conclude that maybe the U.S. can turn the tables on the Davids of the world and apply asymmetric deceptive tactics of its own to win. But as one reads their catalog of the tactics available to insurgents in urban terrain, one might instead infer that the prospects for the success of Goliath against David are unfortunately not too good.

David has lots of advantages: ability to hide, speed, agility, and ever-changing, quick-witted initiatives. His target is large and can be very vulnerable to a single, well-directed blow. He can blend into the crowd, hide behind trees and rocks, and confuse Goliath with false information. David can exhaust the patience and stamina of Goliath by stepping on his toes and then running for cover before the befuddled giant can respond. Confounded by repeated feints, Goliath can become weary, impatient, slow to act, and easy prey for the fatal blow. It can get a lot worse if David has one or more buddies who can join in with random acts of distraction or destruction.



Had Goliath better run for the hills before it is too late? Or can he try to apply tools of asymmetric war himself? One thing is sure: this David-Goliath metaphor is getting a bit heavy to carry. Let's look a little more directly at how the United States might approach some of its unconventional adversaries. We propose three working principles.

FIRST, the U.S. should continue and strengthen efforts to foster conditions of peace and stability. Doing so means aiding economic development and cooperation, helping build a cooperative international community, and supporting democratic regimes. Support for democratic regimes may at times include military alliance and security support. The overall objective, though, is to reduce the probabilities that radical insurgent forces will emerge by preventing the disaffection they feed on.

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SECOND, the U.S. should pick its fights carefully. We are probably beginning to understand that we cannot march in and produce tranquil democracies at the point of a gun. Sometimes, as with the need to remove the al Qaeda base of support in Afghanistan, we may have no choice other than military intervention. (It can also be argued that had we provided more support for peaceful development after the Soviets left Afghanistan, the Taliban might never have achieved the position it did.)

When we must fight, we should also pick our military objectives carefully. The first President Bush decided that while the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait should not be allowed to stand, the costs of occupying Iraq and overthrowing its ugly regime would be too high. In retrospect, that looks like a sound decision.

Once we are engaged with violent insurgents, it would be nice to think that we could outsmart them, perhaps by cleverly undermining their commitment to their cause or their belief in its ultimate success. Unfortunately, those with unshakeable ethnic, nationalist, religious, or ideological faith often accept the prospect of martyrdom; the tools of persuasion, dissuasion, or deterrence do not work well with them.

THIRD, favor containment over confrontation. In places where our adversaries can neither be sought and destroyed (without destroying as well the societies from which they have emerged), nor persuaded to change their ways, the best course of action is probably to back off. While trying to cut off support for the truly committed, we should try patiently to contain them and the damage they can do. As a policeman once said about living in Washington, DC, there are some neighborhoods to avoid since “even the cops don’t go there.” We are sure there are similar neighborhoods in Iraq where we need to keep the bad guys in rather than try to go there.

There may be some not-so-dangerous neighborhoods in an asymmetric war where containment does not apply, and indeed could lead to creating more adversaries. These transition neighborhoods might respond to supportive investments and help with the needs of day-to-day living including dealing with such issues as providing food, health care, water, power, education—within an atmosphere of safety and security. Sadly, this is turning out to be impossible today in many parts of Iraq because insurgency is spreading to even the “good neighborhoods.” Worse, ethnic divisions and the presence of non-governmental militias threaten to turn the insurgency into a full-blown civil war. If the level of violence rises to the point where we have to destroy cities in order to save them, then we can’t engage the transition neighborhoods or contain the bad neighborhoods. Then the admonition from the DC police probably applies to the entire country. There are some places where even Goliath does not go. Containment of whole countries may sometimes have to do. ■